

'Fantastic Reviewed 1804 Dollar' By Williamson

A number of book reviews covering "The Fantastic 1804 Dollar" have appeared in numismatic publications since the appearance of this important volume on an important coin. Here is a new slant.—Editor.

By Raymond H. Williamson
A.N.A. 9482

"The Fantastic 1804 Dollar" by Eric P. Newman and Kenneth L. Bressett. Associates in Research: Walter H. Breen and Lynn Glaser. Copyrighted 1962, published and sold at \$3.50 by Whitman Publishing Co., Racine, Wisconsin. Library of Congress Catalog 62-19453. Vinyl-coated board cover, 144 pp., incl., Index of Names, and 49 illustrations.

This definitive "1804 Dollar

Book" is the acknowledged product of the research efforts of a four-man team of seasoned numismatists and scholars in the field of United States coinage. Each man had worked independently on the subject on and off for many years. Vigorous collaboration began in 1959.

The text was written by Newman, while the substantial efforts of Bressett yielded the pedigrees and illustrations of each of the 15 known specimens.

The authors cite the cooperation of some 53 people and seven institutions; they also refer with scholarly precision to some hundreds of literature sources. Yet the book is easy for even the neophyte to read—in fact it is breezy at times. The printing, the cover, the illustrations, the index: all are superbly done.

While most collectors of United States coins can never afford ownership of a U.S. silver dollar dated 1804, they will find rewarding material on every page of this book. They will be stimulated not only by the detective work on the 1804 dollar, but also by mint history, law, the mechanics of coinage, rumor mongering, dealers' practices, fraud, concealment of officials, historical research, and the revelations of early numismatic books. Enlightening to many will be the schematic diagram of the old-style Castaing machine used in the first U.S. Mint for lettering and upsetting the edges of coins. Apparently no such machine has survived—not even a picture of one.

A couple of important lessons for future numismatic authors are built into this book: First, it is vital that today's writer challenge the printed word when it can be deduced that the original author's motive was to conceal or to create interesting fiction rather than to communicate truth; and second, it is entirely possible to piece together with confidence a jigsaw puzzle of facts from partially sound and partially speculative source material—with care and patience and a tight rein on the

purely imaginative; the precise shape of a few missing pieces can be established with excellent probability.

It would be most difficult to exaggerate the thousands of man-hours required to research this complex, controversial, frustrating subject. The most recent references cited are to material dated in August and September of the present year (page 66), relative to David B. Spink's disclosure of a heretofore unknown specimen pedigreed to an 1834 proof set presented to the King of Siam in 1836.

While a few facets of the story can never be determined absolutely, the authors arrive at 23 definite conclusions near the end of the text. The twenty-third conclusion, while not as beautiful as the twenty-third Psalm, has a common theme making both suitable for reading at funerals:

23. "There are no genuine 1804 dollars and those struck from mint-made dies which bear that date are ante-dated fantasies. The 'King of American Coins' is an impostor, but was made for a king."

All but the most utterly irreconcilable will be firmly convinced by the authors' conclusions. The United States silver dollar dated 1804 still is the "King of American coins;" throughout history, few kings acted less kingly because they were illegitimate or usurpers.

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